Imperial Valley's Mexican - Chinese Pheasants

By Chet Hart

The gaudy ring-necked pheasant has been in the Imperial Valley in generally sparse numbers dating back to about 1920. That it is in this region is interesting for several reasons: the local ringneck population here is evidently the southernmost in North America; much of the region is below sea level, as much as about 230 feet, and surrounded by desert; the climate is hot and arid, with many pheasants here never seeing frost or rain; and the pheasants are supported entirely by irrigated agriculture in one of the most intensively farmed areas in the country. This demonstrates the adaptability of the bird. But perhaps the most intriguing question is how they came to be here, a mystery until I happened upon the answer.

In 1950 I was a biologist on the DFG's pheasant research project, assigned to survey the pheasant situation in Imperial Valley. Living in Brawley, I cruised the fields and talked to farm workers, interviewing some of the state's agricultural pioneers. Several insisted that when they first arrived about 1920, pheasants were already present. This was puzzling, as stocking records showed that the old Bureau of Game Farms didn't plant pheasants in that part of the state before 1926.

Everyone knowledgeable about pheasants locally told me there were far more pheasants in Mexicali Valley, the Mexican side of the same agricultural area that is roughly bisected by the International Boundary. But when I started to go over and survey, Mexican border officials told me I couldn't go outside the Mexicali city limits. I retreated to the U.S. Consulate in Calexico for help. After making numerous phone calls on my behalf, the staff said they couldn't help me. It seemed the Mexican officials were retaliating for a recent U.S. clamp-down on Mexicans illegally crossing the border, or so I was told.

So I further retreated to my Brawley temporary home area, and happened to encounter Jim Reynolds, the local warden. After listening to my tale of woe, he said there were always ways to get around such things down there. He suggested I contact Allan Axton, the local CHP officer who hunted pheasants across the border and had contacts.

I called Axton, who suggested we go to Mexicali and talk to his Mexican bondsman. (At that time aliens were required to be bonded to hunt in Mexico.) We did on his next day off. The bondsman listened to my story and said "Let's go talk to the authorities." He drove us to their governmental offices where we spoke with a tall, distinguished-looking, white-haired gentleman in military khakis. The bondsman acted as interpreter, and I couldn't follow the flow with my limited Spanish. The bondsman abruptly said, "Let's go." He explained as we headed back to California. He said to put the request in writing on official letterhead stationary, put on the closest thing I had to a uniform, and come back tomorrow.

I had some DFG stationary, so my wife typed out the request on it. The next morning I put on a khaki shirt with a DFG shoulder patch, and the three of us returned. This time the official took my written request, walked over to a typist, and dictated something to her. Shortly after, I had in hand a special permit to make scientific studies of the "Phaisan de Color" in Mexicali Valley. As we made our way back to the bondsman's office, Axton and I were complimenting ourselves on surmounting the Mexican bureaucracy, but the bondsman cut us short. "He's my cousin and he speaks perfect English," he said.

After that I spent a week driving around Mexicali Valley, surveying the area as pheasant habitat, without being stopped or required to show the permit.

The Mexican side wasn't farmed as cleanly or intensively as Imperial Valley, with different crops that were more favorable to pheasants. There was cotton and winter wheat or barley, with stubble left standing after harvest. These interspersed with other crops, providing the cover and diversity required by pheasants. (The cropland habitat was very similar to the central San Joaquin Valley crops that produced good pheasant populations during most of the 1960s and 1970s.)

Perhaps at least equally important, it was all irrigated, with many wet spots from waste irrigation water being dumped in the nearest vacant field or waste area, where it grew excellent cover.

After I finished the field surveys, I asked where I could get acreages (hectares) of various crops grown, and was directed to the Mexicali offices of the water supply agency. Upon trying to explain to the receptionist in my poor Spanish what I wanted, she disappeared but soon returned with a tall, middle-aged "gringo." When I explained what I was doing and wanted, he quickly set people to getting the required tabulations and reports. As we waited, he asked me if I would like to hear how pheasants came to be in Mexicali Valley. Upon my response that I would be deeply grateful for the answer to this mystery, he launched into a story that fascinated me.

He was Walter K. Bowker, Jr., the son of an American engineer who in the early 1900s supervised construction of the first irrigation canal from the Colorado River. It passed through much of Mexicali Valley before turning north and also

delivering irrigation water to Imperial Valley. Much of the labor force was Chinese. One day a delegation of Chinese laborers came to his father saying they were homesick for some vestige of their homeland. They had decided they would feel better if they could see some of their native pheasants about, and asked if they could send back to relatives in China to ship some. His father didn't object.

He said he was still a fairly young boy when, in 1912, he saw the pheasants arrive in hand-woven wicker cages. They were transported by railroad to the easterly end of the valley, near the Colorado River, where they were released into irrigated croplands.

Evidently the habitat was to their liking and they flourished, soon expanding into Imperial Valley, most likely following the canal route or those of the New and Alamo Rivers which conveyed drain and waste water northerly into the Salton Sea. These no doubt were the wild pheasants seen in Imperial Valley before the first plants of game farm birds in 1926. From my observations, the roosters bore plumage characteristics typical of the Chinese ringneck: prominent white eyebrows and olive cap on the head; blue-gray rump patch; and straw-colored flanks.

The pheasants in Mexicali Valley are probably the purest of the Chinese ringneck populations left in North America from direct introductions of pheasants from China. It has remained a viable population, but with hunting greatly restricted in recent years. Generally, Mexican regulations require a Mexican licensed guide, and there are several working out of the Calexico-Mexicali area. Tyically, "muchachos" flush and retrieve birds in driven-type hunts. California hunters should be familiar with requirements for bringing birds across the border.

But those who hunt in Mexicali Valley should give thanks to those homesick Chinese for the hunting opportunity.

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Ring-necked Pheasant

Ring-necked pheasants originally came from Asia. California's first pheasant populations were started through purchase and release of birds by the State Board of Fish Commissioners in 1889-1898. Pheasant introductions were given new impetus in 1881 when Chinese ring-necks from Shanghai were stocked in Oregon and quickly established a large population. California started obtaining birds from Oregon in 1889, and received a shipment of pheasants from Hong Cong a few years later. The Chinese ring-neck proved better adapted to conditions in California, and remains the dominant strain in our wild populations today. Pheasant populations eventually became established in the Central Valley, but also in the Owens Valley, Santa Clara Valley, Honey Lake Valley, Imperial Valley, and the Klamath Basin. Pheasant numbers and range have been severely reduced over the past several decades in California, due to the advent of intensive agriculture and to housing development. Nevertheless, where appropriate habitat exists, there are still good pheasant populations in our state, and they are a very popular game bird.

Pheasants are one of our largest game birds. Average weights for males are about 2 ¾ pounds, and for females about 2 ¼ pounds. The females are drab and generally brown colored, while the males have long tails and are brilliantly colored with copper, blue-green, and black. Males, or cocks, also have a prominent white ring around their necks.

Ideal pheasant habitat is a mosaic pattern of croplands, with adjacent herbaceous and woody cover. Like other gallinaceous game birds, pheasant chicks need a diet high in insects to obtain adequate protein for the first several weeks of life. In addition to insects, adult pheasants eat a wide variety of foods, including weed seeds, green leafy vegetation, and grain.

The DFG's Game Take Hunter Survey indicates that about 145,000 wild pheasants are taken annually in California, by about 45,000 hunters. Pheasants are exciting to hunt, and most hunters get great satisfaction in training their hunting dogs and watching them work pheasants. Pheasant hunting is available on numerous public areas, particularly in northern and central California.